How History is Made: A Student's Guide to Reading, Writing, and Thinking in the Discipline

HOW HISTORY IS MADE: A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO READING, WRITING, AND THINKING IN THE DISCIPLINE

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

OVERVIEW

Members of the UTA History Department have drafted this project with the intent of offering students a single text that explains the terms, ideas, and skills necessarty to succeed in the discipline of history. Each major section offers insights into the critical thinking, reading, and analysis commonly used by historians, as well as some practical tips for researching and writing an essay on a historical topic. Like the concepts they attempt to explain, sections are linked together, allowing readers to read this text in the order that makes sense to them and/or their instructors. Insights and corrections are welcome.

CREATION PROCESS

This project was the brainchild of Kimberly Breuer and Scott W. Palmer, and was developed under the guidance, encouragement, and funding of the UTA Libraries' UTA Cares Grant and especially Michelle Reed. Stephanie Cole and Brandon Blakeslee took over much the writing and formatting (respectively) at a crucial stage of the project, but several members of the UTA History Department have contributed, including Kimberly Breuer, Scott W. Palmer, Gerald Saxon, Charles Travis, Andrew Milson, James Sandy, David Baillargeon, Evelyn Montgomery, Alex Hunnicutt, and Greg Kosc.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

Scott W. Palmer and Kimberly Breuer conceived of the project and received a UTA Cares Grant to make this work possible. They also provided the initial organization and recruited contributing authors to the project. Stephanie Cole took over the project when it was stalled and her revisioning brought it to completion. She has written or revised most chapters in this book. Kimberly Breuer guided the entire project and acted as final editor

and keeper of revisions. And Brandon Blakeslee created most of the interactive elements and links within the text to make the user experience more enjoyable. All four contributed original content to the textbook.

We would like to thank our colleagues who provided content or who test drove the piloted version of this work in their Historical Methods classes. We are also grateful to our students who piloted the project and offered insights and suggestions–and who, we hope, will continue to do so!

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INTRODUCTION

It is likely that advocates of every discipline believe their subject is unique, but in history we know it to be true. Every subject, every family–indeed everything–has a history, which makes most everyone a historian of a sort. This pervasive familiarity with history (bolstered by requirements for students in public schools to complete courses in US history in some states) has a political side as well. In the last few hundred years, with the rise of nation states, communicating a shared understanding of the history of one's country has become an important part of building a cohesive identity and establishing patriotic feelings. Many, if not most, adults legitimately claim a degree of ownership of the past. They want to know about the history of their country, their ethnic group, their state, their family.

While this widespread thirst for stories about the past creates an audience for historians, it can complicate the process of writing history. In every era, including our own, both politicians and historians have debated the validity of some claims about the past. Some of these debates emerge from honest differences in interpretation from limited source material while others emerge from competing political positions. We think the best outcome for students of history is that they will learn the difference between the two, and thus not be subject to someone else's claim about "what history tells us." One benefit of this book–and the introductory historical

research methods course it is usually attached to–is that helps students build the critical thinking skills necessary to discern what is behind such debates and whether one side has a better argument than the other.

A less lofty, but an equally important, goal for this book is that those who read it will learn how to do well in history courses by developing the ability to read, research, and write according to the standards established in our discipline. Becoming familiar with how historians customarily approach questions about the past–as well as learning to how to read critically, research efficiently, build strong arguments based on evidence, and write with clarity–are the lessons that will give history students not only a leg-up in their history courses, but provide important, marketable skills useful in other courses and in many careers.

If you remember nothing else, we hope that the main lesson you gain from reading this book is that within the professional *discipline of history* (unlike the history that everyone owns) there are standards for research and writing about the past. In a historical methods course, you will practice those skills and then test your mastery of them (we hope) by completing your own historical research paper. The first four units of this book–"Thinking Historically," "Reading Historically," "Researching Historically," and "Writing Historically"–offer descriptions of the essential skills. The fifth unit–"Performing Historically"–offers advice about presenting your research findings as well as a bit about some of the careers open to those with an academic training in history. Dive in, so that you too can know what it means to think like an historian!

Stephanie Cole

PART I.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Historians are about a lot more than impressing readers with cool facts about the past. To know the import of those facts, and to put them into a coherent story, they must develop essential skills in critical thinking and organization. In simple terms, they sift through a great deal of raw data, evaluate it, and create lucid reports for others to read. In history terms, our data are primary sources, our evaluation method rests on assessing the influence of various elements of the specific context, and our "reports" can be anything from research papers to books on a single topic, called monographs, to digital and media artifacts.

While it is the point of this chapter to expand on the above sentence, you should read it resting in the knowledge that learning to succeed as a history student will provide you with many of the same skills needed for professional success. As do those in any number of professions including law, business, and teaching, historians frequently begin with data that can be both extensive in quantity and contradictory in quality, and

so must determine what is most important; they have to resolve contradictions and ultimately tell a coherent story, one that their audiences find compelling and meaningful. In essence, history requires essential critical thinking skills, including judgment, synthesis, and creativity.

As is often the case, the best way to begin to develop higher-order thinking skills is break them down into manageable chunks and practice putting them into action. This chapter starts by defining the term *history* and explaining a bit about how the discipline of history is structured. As scholars, historians must build on the knowledge of others, rather than pursuing stories and information for its own sake. They participate in the academic project—a phrase often used to capture what scholars do when they consider how new knowledge relates to current understandings. The nature of historical thinking—evaluating and ranking types of evidence, figuring out how to weave together fragments of meaning, knowing when to recognize historical fallacies and other sloppy thinking patterns—forms the core of the chapter. Once you've oriented yourself toward some of the main ideas behind historical thinking, you'll be ready to move onto the next section—Reading Historically—which focuses on perhaps the most essential skill historians (and history students) possess, that is, how to read all sorts of documents critically.

CHAPTER 1.

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Though you have likely spent a good part of your education sitting in history classes and reading history books, you probably have not really thought deeply about how to define the subject. In many ways, it's easier to start with what history is not: It is not simply a record of what happened in the past. For one thing, clearly too much happened yesterday alone—let alone ten, one hundred, one thousand years ago—to record. People ate meals, chose which socks to wear, kissed someone new, scanned their Twitter feed, etc., etc. History is not even a record of important things that happened in the past, because that definition raises the question of what counts as important and who gets to decide. If those new lovers kissing for the first time were Antony and Cleopatra—whose relationship redirected Egyptian history—or if the meal inspired an immigrant activist by reminding of her roots, then those seemingly mundane actions were critical. Deciding what is important—which among myriad of past events should be retold, the order to put them in, how to phrase stories so that they reach the right audience—that is what history is. As historians James Davidson and Mark Lytle put it, "History is not 'what happened in the past;' rather it is the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past."

Historians are tasked with finding evidence about the past and then deciding what to do with it. They research, evaluate, and write using what past actors have left behind. That means that the historical narratives scholars (including you!) create actually depend upon scholars' interpretations of extant evidence— on what we call "primary sources." **Primary sources** are those produced by the actors of the time and can run the gamut from oral histories to government documents to Hollywood films to material culture and beyond. Historians also keep in mind other historians' writings, or **secondary sources**. Historians seek as many sources from as many different perspectives as possible, and scrutinize each one carefully, in the attempt to overcome any biases infusing those sources. Yet, no matter how skilled the researcher there will be gaps in the sources that require interpretation. Gaps or silences in the record merit attention, meaning that historians must consider why some perspectives are not found in archives or in published scholarship. The reason may be perfectly harmless, such as the warehouse fire in 1921 that destroyed the 1890 U.S. Census manuscript schedules (the millions of records left by enumerators who went house-to-house with questionnaires). The resulting silence about literacy rates among immigrants (or a number of other topics that rely on Census records) for that decade is frustrating and has certainly diminished our knowledge of the past, but historians do not need to explain the silence beyond noting this accident of history. At other times, silences speak directly to the experience of those under study, such as the shortage of written records by enslaved peoples. In this case, the silence must be explained by the pernicious decision by

White legislators to limit the literacy of enslaved Americans and is itself a part of the history of slavery. In sum, historians must be adept at not only ferreting out sources and assessing their meaning, but also evaluating the meaning of what remains hidden. Writing history is at heart the art and science of deciding how to stitch together what remains of the past in a way that is meaningful to readers in the present.

Where does the (social) science part come from? Though gaps in the record mean that we can never know everything about the past–and thus a certain amount of art and interpretation is necessarily a part of history–historians mimic scientific processes, posing and testing hypotheses and placing weight on the use of peer review before publication. Guidelines about the value of a source, rules about how you record where you find it, and advice on how to present your findings when you present them to the public (or just your instructor) are all part of an effort to create reliable scholarship that can be replicated—the key elements of reason. Writing and teaching history successfully depends upon your ability to understand and master those guidelines. Indeed, your obligation to take this course reflects the opinion among historians that while we know a good deal of art shapes our interpretations, we still value the role of scientific inquiry in our discipline. You have been assigned this book because your instructor wants you to think like an historian.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

It's worth pointing out that while the present-day discipline of history is marked by shared standards of practice, historians as a group debate virtually everything, from what should be studied to the precise cause and effect of almost every event. While historians today no longer embrace the notion of cyclical history (that time is not linear, and events reoccur repeatedly) or providential history (that God is directing all events for a particular outcome), they do sometimes accept a progressive view (that humanity is constantly improving). Most contemporary historians, however, exist somewhat closer to a postmodern view of history—that is, that a pure understanding of the past is unknowable, but that learning as much as we can about the past from our current (changing) perspectives helps us learn more about ourselves and our own time.

These different **philosophies of history** are part of the long-term history of history. In the past century though, with the rise of **professional history**, the history of history involves chronicling and analyzing historical debates–discussions in which some historians lobby others to revise previous interpretations of past people and events for a range of reasons. Some of these debates stem from differences in political perspective, some emerge out of access to new sources or new ideas about how to read old sources. Other conflicts between historians happen because of a difference in epistemology—roughly speaking, because some historians emphasize the ability of culture and ideas to shape the importance of economic/material

infrastructure, and other historians see it the opposite way around (that is, that certain geographies or other material structures permit or promote what sort of ideas and cultural artifacts develop).

History graduate students and professional historians spend a good deal of time thinking about the implications of these different philosophies. While the really old philosophies (cyclical or providential history) are seldom discussed, the newer ones based upon political and epistemological differences are at the heart of many lively debates among historians. For most readers of this text, it's enough to understand that such distinctions exist, and to be aware of the fact that historical interpretations vary not only over time, but between competing points of view. The section below, which explains historiography, and guidance in the next part Reading Historically, will give you some tools for discerning interpretive points of view. Awarness of differences and understanding where they come from will be among the most important critical thinking skills you develop as a history student.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Writing about the past has changed over time. In other words, history has a history, and the fancy term for how historians recount and analyze previous interpretations of the past is "historiography." **Historiographical change** refers to the fact that over time, historians have altered their explanations of past events, and the discipline of history keeps track of, and continuously reconsiders, these changing interpretations; writing

about historians (or the history of history as opposed to the story of the past) is called **historiography**.

One of the easiest ways to grasp the importance of historiography involves looking at a subject such as slavery in the United States, for which the history has changed dramatically over the last one hundred years. The first professional historians of slavery wrote in the very years in which state and local governments were establishing and justifying racial segregation. Their interpretations of the "peculiar institution" (as slavery was sometimes called) fit in with their society's world view, and often suggested slavery was benign or at least a critical part of the process of "improving" those of African descent. As legal segregation, the concept of eugenics, and other types of racialized thinking came increasingly under attack over the course of the twentieth century, such views were criticized and the historians of slavery more often focused on the violence and dehumanizing elements of the institution. As the Civil Rights Movement led to the outlawing of segregated education, it opened the door to new scholars with new perspectives. Critical race studies today–scholarship that assesses the many ways that the justification of racial slavery has shaped U.S. politics and society–has a decidedly different view of enslaved peoples than did the history written in the past. The scholarship about the history of race also actually has within it a variety of perspectives, including differences between historians about how the global economy, technology, religion, gender and/or disability shaped the experience of the enslaved, those who claimed ownership, and those who fought for and against the institution of slavery.

Though other historical topics may not have seen shifts

as dramatic as the scholarship on slavery, every subject has experienced some shifting over time. As you read **secondary sources** on historical topics that interest you, try to become conversant with some of the most prominent historiographical debates for your own periods of interest. Most scholarly history essays have an historiographical section, that is a section near the beginning that notes how previous historians have approached the same topic, or ones closely related to the subject under study. Historians touch on earlier interpretations in order to show how their own work will add to what we already know, perhaps by pointing out errors in the use of a **primary source** or how a particular philosophical or political assumption unfairly limited analysis. More likely for student researchers, this reference to earlier interpretations will point to a gap–by place, or era, or perspective–that the student's research can help fill. Because it will fill a gap in what we know, the historical research presented is thus more meaningful, a positive reason to be aware of the historiography of your subject. A negative reason also exists: Those who don't consider current knowledge risk "reinventing the wheel" or worse, erring in interpretation because of unfamiliarity with a major finding by an earlier historian. Whatever side motivates you as a student, it's important you attempt to learn the historiography of topics in which you hope to specialize.

CHAPTER 2.

WHAT IS HISTORICAL ANALYSIS?

The principal goal of students in history classes and historians in practice is to master the process of **Historical Analysis.** History is more than a narrative of the past; the discipline cares less for the who, what, where, and when of an event, instead focusing on how and why certain events unfolded the way they did and what it all means. History is about argument, interpretation, and consequence. To complete quality historical analysis—that is, to "do history right"–one must use appropriate evidence, assess it properly (which involves comprehending how it is related to the situation in question), and then draw appropriate and meaningful conclusions based on said evidence.

The tools we use to analyze the past are a learned skill-set. While it is likely that the history you enjoy reading appears to be centered on a clear and direct narrative of past events, creating that story is more difficult than you might imagine. Writing history requires making informed judgments; we must read primary sources correctly, and then decide how to weigh the inevitable conflicts between those sources correctly. Think for a moment about a controversial moment in your own life—a traffic accident perhaps or a rupture between friends. Didn't the various sources who experienced it—both sides, witnesses, the authorities—report on it

differently? But when you recounted the story of what happened to others, you told a seamless story, which—whether you were conscience of it or not—required deciding whose report, or which discrete points from different reports—made the most sense. Even the decision to leave one particular turning point vague ("it's a he said/she said unknowable point") reflects the sort of judgment your listeners expect from you.

We use this same judgment when we use primary sources to write history; though in our case there are rules, or at least guidelines, about making those decisions. (For precise directions about reading primary sources, see the sections on "Reading Primary Sources" in the next chapter). In order to weigh the value of one source against other sources, we must be as informed as possible about that source's historical context, the outlook of the source's creator, and the circumstances of its creation. Indeed, as they attempt to uncover what happened, historians must learn about those circumstances and then be able to evaluate their impact on what the source reveals. Each actor in a historical moment brings their own cultural biases and preconceived expectations, and those biases are integral to the sources they leave behind. It is up to the historian to weave these differences together in their analysis in a way that is meaningful to readers. They must compare differences in ideologies, values, behaviors and traditions, as well as take in a multiplicity of perspectives, to create one story.

In addition to knowing how to treat their sources, historians and history students alike must tell a story worth telling, one that helps us as a society to understand who we are and how we got here. As humans, we want to know what caused a particular outcome, or perhaps

whether a past actor or event is as similar to a present-day actor or event as it seems, or where the beginnings of a current movement began. ("What made Martin Luther King, Jr. a leader, when other activists had failed before him?" "Were reactions to the Civil Rights Movement similar to those of the current Black Lives Matter movement?" "How similar is the Coronavirus pandemic to the 1918 flu pandemic?" "Who were the first feminists and what did they believe?") Even small aspects of larger events can help answer important questions. ("How did the suffrage movement (or Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, or the gun rights movement, or …) play out in my Texas hometown?")

The very essence of historical analysis is about analyzing the different cause-and-effect relationships present in each scenario, considering the ways individuals, influential ideas, and different mindsets interact and affect one another. It is about figuring out what facts go together to form a coherent story, one that helps us understand ourselves and each other better. But such understandings, or indeed what exactly counts as "coherent," can change with each generation. That's where you and your interests as a student of history come in. Of key importance to the discipline is that our analysis of an event or individual is tentative or impermanent. The job of historians is to study the available evidence and construct meaningful conclusions; therefore, when new evidence and perspectives (including yours!) present themselves it may very well alter our understanding of the past.

As the section on historiography pointed out, a significant part of historical analysis is integrating new understandings of past events and actors with history as

it already written. We don't want to "reinvent the wheel" or simply retell the same story, using the same sources. Even as scholars provide new perspectives or uncover new evidence, revising what was thought to be known, they cannot simply ignore previous historical writing. Instead they need to address it, linking their new understanding to old scholarship as a part of building knowledge. Sometimes the linkage is a direct challenge to past explanations, but more likely new historical writing provides a nuance to the older work. For example, a scholar might look at new evidence to suggest a shift in periodization ("actually the rightward shift in the Republican Party began much earlier than Ronald Reagan's campaigns") or the importance of different actors ("middle-class Black women were more critical in the spreading of Progressive reforms in the South than we once thought"). Because historians are concerned with building knowledge and expanding scholarship, they choose their subjects of research with an eye toward *adding* to what we know, perhaps by developing new perspectives on old sources or by finding new sources.

For another view on historical thinking, this one offered by the American Historical Association, see "What does it mean to think historically?"

CHAPTER 3.

HOW HISTORIANS APPROACH HISTORY: FIELDS AND PERIODIZATION

Writing history means much more than just re-telling old stories. **Primary sources** can be tricky; some contain internal references or unique vocabulary and interpreting them takes skill. Getting a handle on the vast number of secondary sources produced on many topics also requires training. While you will develop your skills with primary and second sources in this course, many of the best insights will come only with years of experience. In their efforts to build solid knowledge about the past, professional historians—those trained formally in the research and writing of history—inevitably specialize in a field of study. As experts in one or two fields, they can focus on the unique properties of their genre of historical records and put some limits on the secondary literature with which they must be familiar.

Typical fields of study focus on specific geographic areas, a single scholarly approach, and/or set time period. The list of courses offered by your history department will give you an idea of a few such fields: British Empire, History of Science and Technology, US Women's history, Military history, and Texas, 1845-present. Below you'll find an explanation of how scholars go about defining fields of study, including historical eras. As you read this chapter, consider not only how the definition of historical

fields and periodization has shaped the history profession and your course of study as a history major, but also how the process reflects larger philosophical assumptions that undergird the discipline. Such assumptions change though—might the present era be another one in which common approaches to the past shift into new configurations?

HISTORICAL FIELDS

On one hand, history departments throughout the US are dedicated to investigating the totality of the human experience, or at least the past for which we have historical records. But on the other, these departments are also the product of contemporary historical forces, and so tend to be particularly reflective of the dynamics that shaped the country. To wit, Anglo cultural influence and attention to the "rise of the West" long shaped the history written by Europeans and Americans. In any given department, therefore, you will likely find plenty of faculty specializing in some element of US, European, or Atlantic history. Political and social movements during the lives of contemporary historians have also had an impact. While economic, political, and military history continue to be popular sub-fields in US history, following the Civil Rights movement, newly integrated departments (by race, gender, and sexual orientation) have increased attention in scholarship and teaching to "social" histories, or history from below. Histories of laborers, women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ and disabled communities as well as a whole gamut of social movements have caught the interest of historians and

history students alike, and the sub-fields associated with these movements have proliferated.

Of course, most major history departments around the country attempt to also have a faculty member (or sometimes two) from each of the following regional areas: Middle East/North Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Latin American, Sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia. In an increasingly interconnected, globalized world, comparative history has grown in importance and new fields focusing on Atlantic, Pacific, World, transnational, and borderlands history have sometimes supplanted the teaching of history focused on a nation state. With the exception of Atlantic history, which took off during the Cold War and was part of an overarching search for common ground among the allies facing down the Soviet Union, these more expansive fields have become increasingly resonant in the post-Cold War era, which has been characterized by intense globalization and its attendant global labor market, supply chain, and transculturation.

Within these geographic outlines, when pursuing research most historians specialize further in either by approach or time period, or both. Though their teaching subjects can be broader, historians might call themselves experts in the US Civil War, Modern European women's history, or the cultural and intellectual history of the Ming Dynasty. Apart from the requirements of fluency in other languages, the differences between sources that focus on modern military developments differ quite a bit from those concerning Confucian ideology, and rarely would one historian feel comfortable working with both sorts of **primary sources** or try to keep track of the **historiographical developments** in two such divergent

fields. As a result, historic sub-fields usually have thematic angles as well, including aspects of technological, economic, political, legal, military, diplomatic, environmental, social, intellectual, or cultural history. The latter fields encompass still more sub-specialties based on gender, sex, race, ethnicity, disability, and legal status. The instructor in your US women's history class might actually be a specialist on women, gender, race, and sex in the nineteenth-century US South.

While the permutations are not endless, they do allow for some fairly narrow fields of study, as scholars sometimes need decades to develop the necessary knowledge base. Yet just because historical specialization allows ease with sources, methods, and approaches to the past, it does not follow that as a beginner you cannot contribute to scholarship. Often enough, those who have a unique perspective see connections that those long familiar with a story do not. Moreover, learning by attempting to explain the past from your perspective will bring past actors alive to you as well as assure that you grasp just what it is that historians do.

Historical Fields at UTA

- History Majors at UTA:
    - While there is nothing wrong with becoming an expert in individual nation-state or time period (or time period of a nation state) at UTA we want to offer you a broad range of history of which to

explore from professors who are proficient in various regions, periods, and types of history. We also want to encourage you to explore and so to get a major at UTA you have to take a variety of courses both nation specific as well as more broad.

    - Check out the UTA History Courses in the Undergraduate Course Catalog for a full list of courses offered by the History Department at UTA (note: not all classes are offered every semester or every year)

- History Minors at UTA:

    - Say you love history, after all who doesn't, but it just doesn't fit in your class schedule, consider one of UTA's History Minors. With curated focuses like History of Technology and Science, Geography, and Military History, or a "build your own" generic History minor, the UTA History Department offers a broad range of courses for History Minors as well.

    - Find out more about History Minors at UTA

HISTORICAL PERIODIZATION

Another significant way that historians find entry into the vast amount of human experience is to categorize it by blocks of time, or **historical periods**. At a basic level the names given to historical periods simply provide

other options for historical study, in the same way that a historian might specialize geographically or by methodological approach. Fields such as "Nazi Germany" or "Colonial America" both illustrate how political events often define the blocks of time that historians mark for study and do so without controversy.

But more fundamentally, historians' efforts to identify appropriate historical periods can be *very* controversial and is at the heart of what we do. Because the point of establishing accepted historical periods is to help facilitate historical analysis, historians hope to identify periods that have stable characteristics. For example, Victorian England, named after a monarch who ruled from 1837 to 1901, marks a period of rising industrialization, the expansion of British political control around the world, and a transformation of social rules, especially those concerning women and sex. (Perhaps you've heard of the era when people put skirts on piano legs and pasted fig leaves on the genitalia of ancient statues.) Scholars of Victorian England suggest that the expansion of empire was in fact related to the increased prudery and expectation of restraint on the part of women. The justification for imperial control rested on ideas of racial superiority, which in turn rested upon an emerging cultural myth about "English ladies" who were ostensibly quite different from newly colonized women of color with a more casual approach to sex.

But the scholars who identify historical periods are themselves embedded in a specific point in time. Their biases or limited perspective can lead them to over- or under-estimate the importance of an invention, or cultural event, or a popular person of their own era.

Indeed, scholars in the late nineteenth century—Victoria's own contemporaries—started using the label "Victorian England" while she was still alive. Since then, some British historians have questioned the term, arguing that the characteristics we attribute to the period stretch well beyond the limits of her reign. Other historians have defended the term, emphasizing the link between Queen Victoria herself and the many new cultural and social conventions that marked the era—and so the appropriateness of referring to much of the nineteenth century as "Victorian" remains a topic of debate. Likewise, various other blocks of time—the "twentieth century" or the "Renaissance"—regularly inspire discussion about whether they designate a stable period of time or when exactly a period (such as the Renaissance) began and ended.

Another element of periodization is the effort to identify **watershed moments**. In nature, a *watershed* is a spot in a river or stream where the lay of the land forces the water to change the direction in which it flows. Watershed events are those occurrences that altered human behavior or ideology in significant ways. For example, the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons changed not only diplomacy and politics in the postwar era, but also many Americans' sense of security and thus family priorities. Both diplomatic and gender historians see the deployment of atomic bombs in the late 1940s as a watershed moment. Or to take an example from your own lives: Adults living through the current Covid-19 pandemic are already refering to "the Before Times" as a shorthand reference to an earlier historical period, one in which our lives operated differently than they do after the spread of the virus. The lasting changes

in technology and the workplace alone indicate the pandemic will be a watershed moment and that "pre-pandemic" and "post-pandemic" will almost certainly periodize the history of public health, work, and education–at a minimum–for future historians.

But like the process of defining historical periods, the identification of historical watersheds leads to a great deal of debate. Is an event identified as a watershed really the moment in which everything changed? Was one person—or their ideas about politics or technology—a "game changer"? Whereas one historian might see the increasingly insularity of 1950s family life as stemming from the fears brought on by the watershed event of the atomic bomb, another might see that development in family life as connected to rising affluence, and suggest that the true watershed moment was not the bomb, but rather the decision of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to fund research and development for American businesses after the war. Such is the stuff of history and historical debate. After a few more tips on how to analyze historical evidence, make inferences, and avoid historical fallacies (keep reading), you will be able to join some of those debates yourself.

CHAPTER 4.

EVALUATING EVIDENCE

One of the preeminent guidelines of historical analysis is that all historians **evaluate their sources** to determine their quality and accuracy. Beyond determining whether a source is primary or secondary, it is imperative that historians use their knowledge to judge the nature of sources and how they should be used. Remember, each primary source carries with it the biases of its author. These biases alter the presentation of information, as many historical sources are written with clear purpose and intention. Take for example a newspaper editorial written in Atlanta during the American Civil War. Before even reading this document, we need to understand that such an editorial is most likely written from a pro-Confederate source and will therefore be presenting the best possible version of current situation in the war. This source is still very useful for revealing the attitudes of pro-Confederate actors, but information within it about Union troop movements or Union soldiers' attitudes cannot be accepted as fact. The author's bias and the historical context of the source's creation should be noted up front by anyone looking to analyze such a document. We call this information "inherent bias" – in the activity below, you will be able to practice your critical thinking skills by finding inherent bias in a particular document/ context.

Finding Inherent Bias

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://uta.pressbooks.pub/historicalresearch/?p=372#h5p-15

With the understanding of what biases are likely to be present comes the realization that some claims by historical actors may not be entirely true; that is, they are not agreed upon, verifiable from multiple points of view. But again, just because they are not **historical facts**, they still offer value to those historians seeking to explain opinions and attitudes of a particular place and time.

MAKING HISTORICAL INFERENCES AND AVOIDING HISTORICAL FALLACIES

A key element to the historical analysis process is making **Historical inferences**. Historians take a collection of facts and then infer larger understandings and conclusions. In order to answer the how and why questions of historical analysis and research, historians need to gather all the possible evidence, vet it for bias and authenticity, understand the larger picture presented by these facts, and then make logical conclusions based on what they have learned.

Historical fallacies come about due to false reasoning on the part of historians. Their arguments may be built upon shaky logic by not considering inherent biases or by using incomplete and corrupted evidence. Fallacies can come about by not considering multiple points of view or perspectives in gathering documetary evidence, or from lack of complexity when analyzing causality, or from imposing modern sensibilities upon actors in the past, or from not considering change over time. Presented as rational and well supported conclusions, fallacies are incredibly dangerous as they actively spread misinformation and cover up objective historical arguments. Fallacies can be created both intentionally and unintentionally, depending on their authors, the subject matter, and the influence certain arguments can have. One powerful example of a historical fallacy is that the American Civil War was fought over the powers and rights bestowed upon individual states. This argument clouds the immense role that slavery played as the primary cause of the war. Certainly, the causes of the Civil War are complex, but by arguing that it was simply about states' rights, one is presenting an overly simplistic and incorrect version of history that is damaging in countless ways.

Fallacy is incredibly dangerous in historical work as an established and believed fallacy can impede the proper and well-vetted historical analysis from being accepted, sometimes for generations. These historical fallacies can be weaponized and used for political purposes while always slowing the progress of solid historical work. If historians are constantly working to undo the entrenchment of fallacy, they are slowed in progressing their fields. A powerful historical fallacy can be used to

motivate devastating events and have countless times in world history.

In order to avoid historical fallacy, we must be open-minded to proper historical analysis, understand and view multiple perspectives in any event, and focus on determining the difference between facts and biased opinions masquerading as such. By allowing the historical analysis process to take place in full, we as a society can push dangerous fallacy aside and arrive at objectively determined historical conclusions.

CHAPTER 5.

THE STAKES OF HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

One last point before you get started doing history on your own. Getting the process right—learning how to read, research, and write as historians do—is essential as historians think and work in a manner unique to our discipline. Above all, historians weigh the specific context—the impact of new ideas, the influence of a cultural milieu, of the pressures of a unique geography, the crisis brought on by economic change—when explaining why past events occurred as they did. Rather than relying on trans-historical or unchanging notions about human nature or economic theory, historians believe that each event happened within a unique set of factors. They try to assess which elements of a society's culture or economy (or myriad other elements) had the greatest impact on the individuals involved. New historical interpretations have helped beleaguered groups gain awareness of a past community and a better understanding of their own identity; likewise, good history has aided policymakers in drafting ideas about how they might address social problems. Clearly getting it wrong has an impact as well, leading to misunderstandings about the past and fights over primacy of interest.

INTERACTING WITH THE PUBLIC

Much of your focus as a history major is on academic history–reading historical monographs, analyzing primary sources, learning the narrative of events that led to a war or new invention or a major social shift. Too much time focusing on the work of professional historians might tempt you to think that historians just do history for other historians and so doing bad history will only affect a small group. But that is simply not true. There are several ways historians interact with the public at large. For example:

IN HISTORY CLASSES

While it is much easier to appreciate the necessity of, say, medical research in our daily lives, the reality is that historical scholarship is just as important because it is foundational to individuals' identities, worldviews, and the collective consciousness of larger groups. Crucially, individuals' worldviews inform their political opinions and choices; the consequence of such decisions, especially in democratic republics, is the adoption and promulgation of policies, ranging from domestic issues to foreign policy. Getting the story and analysis right is, therefore, a massive responsibility. Perhaps the most important "public" which historians engage are their students. Most state and private universities require some type of history class for graduation, and historical surveys tend to garner the highest enrollments. These surveys are useful because they offer both a long-term and broad perspective to students. To carry all of this off, however, historians must be master synthesizers, integrating economic, political, social, and cultural histories into the

classroom. At the same time they must be specialists, since they are also expected to perform their own research (contributing to our larger store of knowledge) while familiarizing themselves with the major primary and secondary sources in their area of expertise.

THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS

Upon first blush, specialization may seem needlessly obscure and, admittedly, sometimes the purveyors of such knowledge can come off as pedantic. Specialization, however, serves an important societal purpose. Most importantly, the insights and facts established by specialized monographs are the foundation for what students ultimately end up reading in their textbooks. By amassing a number of these monographs we are able to offer specific facts and craft larger narratives about certain issues. Historians are sometimes called upon to testify in court when context is needed trying a case, and their scholarship can also become central to a written court brief. Sometimes their expert knowledge can make the difference as in the recent SCOTUS decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The court's majority decision written by Justice Anthony Kennedy pointed out that social and legal aspects of marriage have changed over time, and to buttress this point he cited amicus briefs submitted by the two most important historical organizations in the U.S.: The American Historical Association and The Organization of American Historians. Additionally, lawmakers and executives at all levels of governance often consult historians when trying to understand specialized topics, or when they are wrestling with how to combat long-standing issues.

THE INTERNET (SOCIAL MEDIA, PODCASTS, ETC.)

One of the gratifying aspects of becoming a historian is that you will over time begin to piece together your own worldview and opinions – all of which will continue to evolve. And, since historical training promotes specialization and persuasive argumentation, historians are well-positioned to extend those arguments to the broader public. While some historians subscribe to the notion that their job is to produce scholarship and then allow it to diffuse to the public via incorporation into textbooks and curricula, it seems fewer and fewer historians believe in such traditional notions. Over the last few years with the explosion of social media, blogs, and podcasts, historians have seized upon the opportunities inherent in these platforms. So, while many rightly decry "fake news" stories spread on social media, historians and other academics are busy doing their best to flood newspapers, the Twittersphere, blogs, and the airwaves/podwaves with expert opinions.

The list of new sites and podcasts is truly expansive, but one stands out. The *Washington Post*, realizing that people were thirsting for expert opinions in the wake of the 2016 election, hired a couple of historians to launch the blog "Made By History," which solicits thoughtful op-ed pieces written by historians. They started in 2017 and just expanded their staff in 2019. Another important tool that historians have utilized recently is the vaunted Twitter thread. Since so many primary sources are freely available online and Twitter also allows you to add photos of documents, many historians have used Twitter to try to

educate or correct popular misconceptions. Efforts by historians have been crucial to correcting the media and helping to foster informed debate. Recently, one popular historian went on NPR's morning show to say that in her research she found no evidence that women used contraception or abortion services in the nineteenth century, and Lauren MacIvor Thompson, a specialist in female reproductive rights, responded with a Twitter thread and several links to point out how laws, such as the Comstock Law of 1873, made it impossible for women to speak forthrightly about these issues so euphemisms had to be employed. MacIvor Thompson's thread went viral and NPR quickly posted a correction. MacIvor Thompson's expertise was quickly recognized, and she was then asked for an interview by *The Atlantic* for a piece on suffragists and the birth control issue.

WHY HISTORICAL METHODS ARE IMPORTANT

Okay, so what if historians interact with the public in a variety of ways, some seen while others largely unseen, if doing history well takes practice and training then the public at large won't be able to tell if you do bad history, right? Well no. Consider the cases below of people who played fast and loose with the facts or were lazy in their contextualization.

CASE 1: NAOMI WOLF (NOT A HISTORIAN, BUT WITH A PHD)

And here is a case that shows why the historical method is very important. What happens when someone calls out your facts and methods on air? Be sure to watch the embedded video in the first link.

Yelena Dzhanova, *The Cut,* "Here's an Actual Nightmare: Naomi Wolf Learning On-Air That Her Book Is Wrong"

and the follow-up: *New York Times,* "Her book in limbo, Naomi Wolf fights back"

CASE 2: DAVID MCCULLOUGH AND *THE PIONEERS*

What happens when your peers call "bias" and "whitewashing" of history and suggest that you are promoting a historical fallacy?

Rebecca Onion, "No Man's Land: Review of David McCullough's The Pioneers" in *Slate*

and Andrew Wehrman's Twitter thread on McCullough

History is in fact everywhere, because everything has a history. But not all history-based productions are equal. Professional scholars are not the only ones who like to claim the mantle of "historian." Amateur historians, journalists, politicians, political pundits, and filmmakers also publish/produce works of history of varying sophistication. In this book, you'll learn about the standards of the scholarly discipline of history in the hopes that you'll become an advocate of history that follows guidelines. The stakes are high, and it's not easy. But this book will help you find the way.